

Review by Christine Becker

Published by Scope

www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/journal/bookrev/books-feb-03.htm

Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film

By Emanuel Levy.

New York and London: New York University Press, 1999; ISBN 0-8147-5124-5, 53

Given American independent cinema's rise to prominence over the past two decades, the time is ripe for a comprehensive account of the catalysts behind that rise, as well as an assessment of indie cinema's effect on American film culture and its relationship to the mainstream Hollywood industry. Emanuel Levy's *Cinema of Outsiders* can serve as a handy viewing guide for whoever aims to write such an account. Consisting primarily of critical reviews of independent films, *Cinema of Outsiders* engagingly assesses the extensive range of work in American independent cinema since the late 1970s. Unfortunately, this text covers a lot of critical ground without digging very deeply into it, leaving crucial questions unexplored.

The introduction, conclusion and first two chapters are the most satisfying sections of the book. The introduction opens in a logical place by addressing how difficult it is to establish a clear definition for contemporary independent cinema. Here Levy identifies the two main factors he feels are essential to such a definition: financing and artistic vision. In Levy's view, as the book title indicates, independent cinema is founded upon the films of "outsiders," iconoclastic writers and directors not willing to compromise their personal visions in exchange for mainstream studio financing.

The first chapter extends Levy's attempts at definition by exploring ten forces that have affected the development of independent cinema. This chapter is therefore a useful sketch of catalysts within both the indie scene and the world of Hollywood that have shaped independent cinema. Throughout these opening sections and in the conclusion, Levy repeatedly considers the difficulties in determining the industrial and aesthetic dividing lines between mainstream Hollywood and the independent filmworld, perhaps one of the most interesting issues in contemporary American film. He notes that some filmmakers, like Steven Soderbergh, have a much easier time moving back and forth between Hollywood and the indie world than others, like John Waters, commenting that "It's always interesting to observe what the established order – mainstream Hollywood – accepts, incorporates, or rejects" (54). Yet all Levy does here is indeed "observe" these issues, rarely analyzing them in any detail, and largely not returning to them until the conclusion.

This is primarily because the bulk of the book consists of critical assessments of individual films and filmmakers, and Levy provides little sense of how each filmmaker relates to the issues raised in the opening sections of the book. The chapters are organized thematically, based on categories of films or filmmakers; chapter titles include "The New York School of Indies," "Comedy and Satire: Tackling Taboos," and "The New African American Cinema." The chapter entitled "The Resurrection of Noir," for example, opens

with a general consideration of how noir styles and themes have been adopted by indie cinema and then reviews the works of Joel and Ethan Coen, John Dahl, James Foley, and others. Levy ends the chapter with the perceptive observation that many indie filmmakers working in neo-noir rely too heavily on flashy style, violence and thematic clichés without a full appreciation of the existential consequences of the genre; he argues persuasively that “Neo-noir in the 1990s is loaded with the excesses of overeager directors” (242). Not even the exalted Coen brothers are safe from his criticism, as Levy finds their works to be stylistically energetic but emotionally shallow.

Such editorial comments provide the main attraction of these chapters, as Levy fruitfully exercises the skills that have served him as a film critic for *Variety*. He provides astute opinions on filmmakers, such as his assessment of Sean Penn: “He seems to mistake pain and intensity for art and truth. His movies are not bad, but they are derivative, based more on amalgams of attitudes than on fully developed narratives” (106). And Levy’s familiarity with film history is extensive and engaging, enabling him to compare John Turturro’s *Mac* to works by John Cassavetes, Jean Renoir and Marcel Carne without seeming too pretentious. Given Levy’s apparent knowledge, though, it is surprising that the book contains significant errors, including misspellings of names, an inaccurate description of the opening of David Lynch’s seminal indie film *Blue Velvet*, and the inexcusable citation of *This is Spinal Tap*’s guitar player as Nigel “Tufnela” (262).

In sum, readers looking for a sharply written compendium of independent film reviews will be well served by *Cinema of Outsiders*. But for those looking for more, the book too frequently raises intriguing issues that it then neglects. For instance, Levy opens the “Female/Feminist Sensibility” chapter with the following questions: “Is there a distinctly female sensibility in indie narratives written and directed by women? Are new meanings established? Do women-directed indies address their audiences in different ways?” (348-349) Unfortunately, he never approaches solid answers to these questions in the chapter’s subsequent film reviews. As such, while the reader gains a good sense of the artistic merits and drawbacks of many independent films through reading the book, Levy never satisfactorily makes clear what all of these films add up to.

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